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DATA ACCESSIBILITY--POLICIES AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRICTURES IN BIG CITY SCHOOLS.

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PUB DATE 9 FEB 68

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.25 HC-$0.76 17P.

DESCRIPTORS- *DATA COLLECTION, *EDUCATIONAL POLICY, *ORGANIZATION, *URBAN SCHOOLS, SCHOOL DISTRICTS, EDUCATIONAL RESEARCHERS, EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH, ADMINISTRATOR ROLE, *RESEARCH PROBLEMS, CHICAGO, IOWA CITY,

THIS PAPER HAS TWO PURPOSES--(1) TO PRESENT A SUMMARY ANALYSIS OF EDUCATIONAL POLICY REGARDING RESEARCH REQUESTS IN 15 BIG CITY SCHOOLS AND SOME COMMENTARY ON THE PROCESSING OF SUCH REQUESTS AND (2) TO MAKE THEORETICAL SPECULATIONS REGARDING CERTAIN ORGANIZATIONAL FACTORS IN LARGE SCHOOL SYSTEMS WHICH OPERATE AS RESEARCH RESTRAINTS. IT IS DISCOVERED THAT THE ESTABLISHED POLICIES REGARDING THE CONDUCT OF RESEARCH OR THE COLLECTION OF DATA BY PERSONS OR AGENCIES OUTSIDE THE LARGE SCHOOL DISTRICTS ARE GENERALLY CONCERNED WITH THE ASSESSMENT OF VALUE AND PURPOSE, THE NATURE AND ADEQUACY OF DESIGN, THE APPROVAL OR VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION BY SUBJECTS, AND THE PURPOSES AND REPUTATION OF THE RESEARCHER. POLICIES RANGED FROM RELATIVELY CONCISE STATEMENTS TO MORE COMPLEX LISTINGS OF SPECIFIC PROCEDURES. THE NATURE OF EDUCATIONAL POLICY REGARDING RESEARCH, HOWEVER, SUGGESTS THAT THE DIFFICULTY RESEARCHERS CONFRONT IS NOT A CONSEQUENCE OF INABILITY TO CONFORM WITH ESTABLISHED POLICY, BUT IS ATTRIBUTABLE TO CERTAIN FACTORS WITHIN THE ORGANIZATION ITSELF. CERTAIN POSTULATIONS REGARDING THE TYPE AND NATURE OF THESE ORGANIZATIONAL FACTORS ARE PRESENTED. THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE ANNUAL MEETING OF THE AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATION (CHICAGO, FEBRUARY 9, 1968), AND APPEARS IN THE IOWA CENTER FOR RESEARCH IN SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION "RESEARCH REPORTS." (HW)

THE IOWA CENTER FOR RESEARCH IN SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION

State University of Iowa

Iowa City, Iowa

Research Reports

ED019749

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OFFICE OF EDUCATION

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Paper Presented At
American Educational Research Association
Annual Meeting, February 9, 1968
Conrad Hilton Hotel
Chicago, Illinois

Permission granted to ERIC to index and abstract this paper.

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EA 001 344

DATA ACCESSIBILITY: POLICIES AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRICTURES IN BIG CITY SCHOOLS

Access to data in large school districts for research purposes is a rather complex problem. Researchers interested in large city school matters are frequently heard grumbling about red tape, delays, lost instruments, and refusals of permission to search records or draw samples.

On the other hand, school personnel point out that researchers are either ignorant or uncaring about the impositions they place upon the district; that there is little return to the district from most of the research, and as a Buffalo, New York administrator reported, "We are in danger of being inundated by the flood of requests."

This brief paper has a two-fold purpose: first, a summary analysis of educational policy regarding research requests in fifteen big city schools together with some commentary regarding the processing of such requests; secondly, some theoretical speculations regarding certain organizational factors in large school systems which operate as research restraints.

Educational Policy

The official policies regarding requests for data (or for permission to conduct research), by outside agencies or individual researchers does not vary a great deal in large city school systems. Among fifteen large systsms that I surveyed the policy statements with reference to such requests differed mainly in detail rather

than purpose. In other words, some policies were broadly conceived while others provided comparatively detailed procedures. The districts surveyed ranged in size from 73,200 pupils to 294,200 pupils (see appendix A).

Among these fifteen school districts eleven indicated a formal established written policy and provided copies of these to me; two districts indicated that their policy regarding research requests was not written, and two other districts indicated that they had no policy regarding research requests. In the latter case, however, these districts never the less spelled out definite procedures through which requests must pass and in all districts it is apparent that a proposed research project or request for data is subject to critical assessment by someone in the school system. Usually this is a deputy superintendent or a director of research. In one case, a school principal had such authority but this was the only system among those surveyed in which such requests were not mandatorily channeled through central administrative offices. (For facsimile policies of three different representative school districts see appendix B).

The procedure for handling research or data requests is generally similar for these systems; the researcher submits his idea, preferably in the form of a meaningful proposal, together with any instruments he plans to use. This is evaluated in terms of (a) its value to the school system; (b) the nature of its design (and therefore the extent that it may disrupt the normal work of the school); (c) approval of the unit or school to be concerned; and (d) the purposes and reputation of the researcher. This process may delay a legitimate piece of research a few days or a few weeks. Respondents generally agreed that proposals for research receive relatively prompt processing.

Some systems of the size I surveyed do receive a great many inquiries from researchers and indicate a willingness to respond to such requests accommodatingly, but it is not surprising that administrators who are involved are somewhat cynical. Respondents in my sample indicated that too many of the proposals they are asked to approve are ill conceived and poorly designed. Another frequent complaint was that there was too little benefit accruing to the schools -- most of it accruing to the researcher. In districts easily accessible to colleges and universities, some long standing norms have developed which constitute a special kind of policy. A respondent in one such city said:

> We have a very good working relationship with the university, who is our greatest source of outside research requests. The people there understand our procedures, and are happy to comply with it. Once in a while a new professor must learn the ropes the hard way, but all in all we are pleased with our association with the university.

The districts also complained that there was too much duplication; many requests reflect total ignorance of data problems in cities; some requests are foolish; that requests frequently assume an obligation on the part of the school system when there is none; that researchers are overbearing with teachers; and that districts seldom receive any follow-up even when policy stipulates it.

In summary at this point, the scope of a district's policy ranged from very general statements like: "Research studies to be conducted in this district shall be authorized by the superintendent or his delegated representative. Each project shall be evaluated in terms of its feasibility, value to the professional development of staff, and contribution to the welfare of students."

At the other extreme, a policy frequently specified the following:

1. Voluntary participation by staff.
2. Person or agency to receive and review proposals.
3. Limitations of responsibility of the district.
4. Notices of approval and routing thereof.
5. Coordination by the research division.
6. Reports of findings to the system and the attendance unit (if involved).
7. No group of children to be involved in more than one project per year.

Research and Data Collection - A Distinction

Clearly there are conflicts between people in the school and people who want to use the school for research purposes. But there is an interesting difference in the nature of the school district personnel's reaction to proposals for conducting research on the one hand and to requests for data or to search records to gather data, on the other hand. There is a real distinction between these two types of research conditions. A district apparently feels more comfortable when a researcher presents a complete statement of what he proposes to do. This allows district personnel to respond to the proposal as a package. There are two important advantages of this procedure for the school district; first of all, district personnel are able to immediately assess the total feasibility of the project in terms of implications for the school district (personnel to be involved,

time, inconvenience, etc.). Secondly, and perhaps more important for big city school districts today, the complete statement in the form of a research proposal provides school district personnel a better basis upon which to evaluate the motives of the researcher. Certainly, this does not insure that the purposes specified by the researcher are indeed those which he intends to pursue, but even that may be apparent in terms of the way the statement "hangs together".

Requests for access to data or permission to search records, on the other hand, are quite different. Large city districts seem to be much more sensitive about requests for data when they are not clearly aware of the way the data shall be used or the purposes for which the data are requested. By virtue of the fact that the big city district finds itself the focal point in a sometimes violent, frequently non-rational, and increasingly complex socio-urban structure, this sensitivity is understandable. Add to that the tremendous size and the bureaucratic rigidity of the public schools in large cities at a time when they are asked to do almost everything differently and better in the face of a stabilized and sometimes decreasing economic base and you have the parameters within which sensitivity develops. The response of such districts to almost any kind of request for information or data by researchers outside of the organization is likely to be somewhat defensive. Where district personnel are not in a position to know the purposes a researcher has for requesting certain data, there is likely to be an assumption that in some way or another the data will be used against the district; i.e. to make the district look bad. There is

ample precedent for this point of view according to personnel in large districts, newspapers have been reported as re-arranging data in order to place a negative emphasis on a conclusion rather than a positive one. For example, a school district rather proudly may put out that 40% of its students scored two standard deviations above the mean on a particular standardized test; the newspaper then prints the story to the effect that 60% of the students scored below two standard deviations above the mean. The distinction between a newspaper reporter and a reliable researcher is not necessarily made on the basis of a rational survey of the situation. When a request for data is presented to a school district without additional information upon which the district can evaluate the purposes for the request and the nature of the way the data shall appear, there is apparently a good chance that the request will be thwarted. One major city had great difficulty with a civil rights research team who studied achievement records of youngsters in a number of schools, and concluded on the basis of what was reported to be a rigorous analysis of the data in kindergarten through the fifth grade, that the longer a youngster stayed in a particular school, the less he achieved from year to year. Personnel in the school district pointed out that the data for each grade were based on different children; in other words due to mobility patterns, the children on whom achievement data were gathered in the second grade were not the same children on whom achievement data were gathered in the third grade. District peraonnel asserted that they had limited success in correcting the misleading conclusion.

It is reasonable to assume that large school districts are apparently sensitive to isolated requests for data as well when personnel within the school district are expected or asked to perform tasks associated with the supplying of it. In the normal day to day activities of many people in school districts throuthout the country compliance with provisions of federal funding agreements necessitates a considerable amount of this kind of activity as a regular part of the job; certain staff people consider this to be official and proper and feel that additional unofficial requests from researchers is a careless imposition. This condition is applicable to all districts -- not just large city districts; however, the great size of large city districts suggests the scope of this reporting activity. Staff personnel in school districts who are primarily responsible for research activities point out that with increasing utilization of information processing equipment, the extent to which such districts can respond to specific requests for data will be substantially improved. They also point out that extensive debugging of the information systems at the present time is contributing to some of the difficulties apparent in accessibility to data, not only by outside researchers but for purposes for internal information needs as well.

Organizational Strictures As Research Restraints

As students of bureaucracy are clearly aware, Max Weber treated contradictory assumptions in organizations only incidentally; he was interested in the characteristics of pure organizations. Weber intentionally ignored the

informal organization because it was compatible with his purpose to do so, but in more recent times we have come to recognize that the informal organization is perhaps as important as the formal. Of this, Peter Blau states:

> "Informal relations and unofficial practices develop among the members of bureaucracies and assume an organized form without being officially sanctioned."

Blau also provides a clue to one of the most significant kinds of research restraints when, in his discussion of the role of expertise and specialization as a factor in the technical efficiency of bureaucratic structures, he suggests that, "Even experts, however, may be prevented by personal bias from making rational decisions." In this paper, this type of condition is referred to as an organizational stricture. The term is borrowed from physiology and as used here refers to a narrowing of the "passage way" through which something must pass; in this case, the something is a research proposal or a request to gather data. Theoretically, it is postulated that the establishment of a special branch or division or bureau within a large school district for the singular purpose of managing and monitoring the research and related activities of the school district will have as one of its major consequences the delimiting of access by outside researchers or research agencies. There are two explanatory derivations of this limiting process:

Derivation A: Research proposals or request for data will be delimited due to the establishment of more stringent criteria.

Derivation B: Research proposals and requests for data will be delimited through the personal bias of research evaluators who consider their own expertise as adequate justification.

The consequences of the establishment of a special research branch can be equally applicable to districts of varying size. Indeed, what is called into question here is the interpretation how large is large. Yet, there seems to be some empirical basis for distinguishing the very large school district. First of all, size contributes to an understanding of the motives for the establishment of such a division. The very large district has as much to gain <u>defensively</u> from the establishment of such an agency whereas a smaller school district, though it might still be large enough to support such a unit, would be more likely to emphasize the role of the research division perhaps as a change agent. Performing "gate keeper" functions can be expected as part of the responsibility of a research division in either type of district; however, the differential emphasis placed on this function by big city school districts compared to smaller districts should be obvious. It becomes one more element in what one might characterize in the big city public school system as the "fire-fighting syndrome."

Another empirical basis for assuming the delimiting aspects of a research branch with reference to personal bias has to do with the large organization's dependency upon impersonal rules, grater concern by personnel with the internal distribution of rewards, and greater competition for professional visibility.

Other Types of Organizational Strictures. -- Other types of organizational strictures which make accessibility to data within the large city school system difficult and which are generally well known to researchers are:

Transmission Strictures. -- Transmission strictures are more familiar to researchers; when instruments or proposals or documents are lost, or delayed, it is usually the result of a transmission stricture. Transmission strictures are manifested either as non-informational in which the document or instrument or proposal arrives at some staff member's desk without any instructions attached. Consequently it receives no action, or as requiring consensus validation and is therefore placed in a file for some upcoming agenda. Transmission strictures do not usually result in more than delays but then, of course, documents are occassionally lost just in the process of moving through the organization. When requests for data rather than research proposals are involved in transmission strictures, the data which the researcher ultimately gets back are almost always dysfunctional for his purposes; this requires that the data then be retransmitted; the implications of that process are notorious.

Disapproval Strictures -- Any proposal or request for data that requires voluntary participation by some subject or the approval of some unit director such as a school principal is always subject to disapproval. In such cases the researcher then must exercise, if it

is available to him, some form of subtle pressure to influence the approval of the unit he wants. This results in delay, and in some cases, in the necessity to redesign.

The Authority Stricture. -- The authority stricture may assume any one of several forms. The most obvious is when two divisions collect similar data and there is disagreement between individuals with equal status as to which division should supply the information. Another form of the authority stricture occurs when a proposal which has been routinely approved by someone comes to the attention of someone who has more authority, and he in turn raises questions about its appropriateness. The authority stricture is also likely to create problems of data accessibility for persons within the organization, or for persons specifically employed by the district to gather certain kinds of data and to pursue certain types of inquiry. This is closely related to those problems of status and prestige which were mentioned in this paper with reference to the delimiting role of the newly established research bureau. However, the nature of explicitly stated rules or informal norms governing the conduct of research by personnel within the organization is not within the scope of this paper.

Summary

Among fifteen large city school districts, the established policies, regarding the conduct of research or the collection of data by persons or agencies outside the school district are generally concerned with assessment of value

and purpose; the nature and adequacy of design; approval, or voluntary participation by subjects; and the purposes and reputation of the researcher. In effect, policies ranged from relatively concise statements to more complex listings of specific procedures. The nature of educational policy regarding research however, suggests that difficulties researchers confront is not a consequence of inability to conform with established policy. Therefore difficulties must be attributable to certain factors within the organization itself. In this paper these factors have been designated with the term "organizational strictures," and certain postulations regarding the type and nature of the strictures were presented.

APPENDIX A

School Systems and enrollments in fifteen units surveyed. Enrollment data are based on: Educational Directory, Public School Systems, 1964-65. U. S. Office of Education, Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Washington, D.C., 1965.

District	Enrollment
Detroit, Michigan	294,200
Houston, Texas	199,800
Cleveland, Ohio	148,800
Milwaukee, Wisconsin	115,900
St. Louis (City), Missouri	112,400
Atlanta, Georgia (City)	108,500
Indianapolis, Indiana	105,600
Boston, Massachusetts	98,600
Denver, Colorado	98,300
Seattle, Washington	95,500
Cincinnati, Ohio	84,100
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania	75,600
Minneapolis, Minnesota	73,500
Buffalo, New York	73,200
Jefferson County, Kentucky	63,300

APPENDIX B

Policy Statement

REQUESTS FOR RESEARCH PROJECTS

Because of the numerous requests from persons not associated with the Cincinnati Public Schools to engage in research studies affecting pupils, it has become necessary to limit participation to those studies which will provide research information of general benefit to the entire school system.

All requests for participation in such studies or for the administration of tests or questionnaires must be cleared with the Associate Superintendent. Any individuals who approach principals or teachers directly should be referred to the Associate Superintendent.

Department of Instruction
Public Schools
December 15, 1961

(Appendix B - continued)

ADMINISTRATIVE POLICY - RESEARCH PROJECTS

The Metropolitan Public Schools will be happy to work with persons who have carefully-planned proposals and who wish to work with our staff.

Due to the large number of requests being received and to facilitate optimum working conditions, the following six requisites will apply, beginning the calendar year 1966.

POLICY

1. A written proposal shall be presented, followed by an interview in the offices of Pupil Personnel Services.

2. All initial contacts with schools and/or persons to be involved shall be made from the office of Pupil Personnel, and the school or schools in question must be willing to participate in the project.

3. There shall be a minimum of class time interruption.

4. A specific group of children shall not be involved in more than one project during a school year.

5. Notification of approval shall be made from the Central Office.

6. The Director of Pupil Personnel shall receive two copies of all project results and/or data, after which he shall refer one copy to the school or schools involved and one copy to the appropriate subject or services area supervisor.

PUPIL PERSONNEL SERVICES
METROPOLITAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS
747-5186

March 8, 1966

(Appendix B - continued)

POLICIES GOVERNING RESEARCH IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The policies listed below relate to research conducted in the Public Schools, and apply equally to members of the staff and to outside institutions and individuals.

These policies have been generally followed for some eight years. They have been reviewed and reendorsed by the Superintendent and staff at this time.

1. Because of the large number of requests and suggestions for research involving pupil and staff time, research in the schools shall be limited to educational research.

2. Research projects shall be evaluated with a view to estimating their potential value for the improvement of some phase of the total educational program, either through direct application of findings to content methodology, etc., or indirectly, to the material, personnel, school or system organization, etc., which affect the learning process.

3. Proposed research plans shall be submitted in writing, together with copies of any instruments to be used. Such outlines shall indicate number and types of personnel to be involved and time required, and include the usual elements of good research design, e.g. sampling techniques, hypotheses to be tested, the validity and reliability of instruments to be administered, etc.

4. The experimental or procedural design shall be such as to give promise of valid and reliable findings within the defined limits.

5. The extent of interruption of the regular program, in terms of teacher and pupil time, shall be weighed against the potential value of each proposed project.

6. Projects are to be undertaken in the schools only after written approval has been given by the Superintendent or an authorized Associate Superintendent.

7. A summary of findings and interpretations is to be submitted prior to release to outside agencies, unless otherwise authorized in advance.

8. Such projects should have the prior approval of college personnel concerned.

February 27, 1961